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on making music with children with PMLD*

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Music on my mind

Rock star turned teacher David Jackson tells of a life making music with children with PMLD

I am a 62-year-old musician and composer. I was in the band Van der Graaf Generator and I now play with Osanna, a progressive rock band from Naples. I am also a teacher and, since 1996, I've been running music workshops and big performance events at Meldreth Manor, a school for children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD) and additional sensory impairments. After all these years, I'm still loving it.

My brief is to run music workshops with all the school's children using Soundbeams and Switches, and to find and train musicians and produce concerts. Soundbeam is "the invisible elastic keyboard in the air". It is a descendant of the first "air wave" musical instrument, the Theremin, made famous by The Beach Boys' song "Good Vibrations". Soundbeam has become known for its ability to unlock the musical potential of people with a whole range of disabilities and SEN. Ultra-sound is used to track every aspect of even the most

minute movement and turn it into MIDI, a universal language used by all electronic musical instruments. Midi signals then translate the commands into music via keyboards, samplers and other computer sound generators. With Soundbeam, if you can move, you can play music.

Soundbeam systems also come with eight simple switch interfaces, which have all of the characteristics of the Soundbeams. Switching and Soundbeaming are wonderful activities for profoundly disabled children, such as those with cerebral palsy. These children can now get musical feedback from whatever movement they have. Soundbeam also enables physically impaired children to work together as a musical team, for example as parts of a human drum kit.

To understand my approach to music, it might help to have a little background. I was sent off to a public school aged nine and was thrust into a world of competitive academia and



David Jackson

"With Soundbeam, if you can move, you can play music."

sport; but it was music that saved me. Everyone had to play something and all the children had to perform regularly in groups. Talented children survived that process and through constant performance, and then fierce competition, the soloists emerged. I was one of those, on piano and flute, but for me all this was not a great chore, it was fun. The regular concerts and contests meant practice and finally celebration; without realising it, I was picking up the guiding principles that I have used ever since in all my projects with children and adults, whatever their abilities: play, learn, practice and celebrate by giving a performance.

Every school year, I guarantee my musicians two big performance events, a Christmas concert and a summer



James Nesbit plays Soundbeam and Switches at Meldreth Manor



Rian Morrison playing Soundbeam

music day. Most years we also get extra gigs, and we've even busked at Convent Garden with massed harpists and two daleks! Together we have tackled everything from Oklahoma to The Four Seasons. We've worked with professionals and amateurs, with primary schools, secondary schools and undergraduates, and with string quartets, orchestras, gospel choirs, Caribbean bands, rock bands and jazz musicians.

As a rock musician I have travelled across Europe and to the USA and Japan. This notoriety, together with Meldreth's reputation, has brought forth many wonderful opportunities for my disability and SEN projects overseas. Indeed, I have led performance projects with centres and schools across Europe since the mid 1990s. Successful projects do not depend on English, but upon a key local person, and they should always include a legacy, if possible. In my case, I always try to fix up local equipment and to train someone to keep the musicians going, and hopefully to get them ready for the next big event.

There have been many wonderful concerts with musicians with disabilities

and SEN, but the high spot for me was probably in 2003 during the Special Olympics in Dublin. I helped create a special music night at The Point and performed with 40 musicians with disabilities and hundreds of dancers and other musicians. Twelve young children with disabilities performed a Soundbeam version of "Also Sprach Zarathustra" through U2's PA system to 7,000 people from 127 countries.

In 2007, I found myself invited to Bethel in Germany to introduce Soundbeam and Switching and a whole new way of music making to another group of people with disabilities. I had agreed, in advance, to the project being filmed. Participants had to be gently auditioned because they were vulnerable and because the technology is never immediately successful with everyone. Of the thirty who came, seven were chosen and agreed to go forward to the performance. They had practised with each other and with me and we celebrated the whole thing with a concert for friends and families. Normally this process would be spread out over a whole term, but this time we did it in just two days. What we created was captured on film and released as the DVD: *David Jackson: Celebration Concert zusammen mit Menschen aus Bethel*.

Musicians have always been ambassadors and there is an enormous value to working with disabled communities abroad that feeds back into my work in the UK. I see different systems and different regimes; I see different priorities and different solutions and I feel the different cultures shining through and changing my own work forever.

Disability does not mask the essence of people. At the Special Olympics,

I saw disabled athletes compete with unbelievable passion and as if their lives depended upon it. As a musician, I have worked alongside children with disabilities and SEN, some of whom have only just discovered that they can be musicians, who have played with the same unbelievable passion and as if their lives depended upon it. I have worked with some child musicians for ten years and have seen their breathtaking progress in so many personal areas, not just in musicianship.

However, there can often be a devastating cruelty at the end. When most children with disabilities and SEN leave school, they leave behind so many wonderful activities and secret skills. Using Soundbeams and Switches to make wonderful music is, sadly, a very specialised activity; there have been many occasions when I have been completely unable to suggest to the parents of my best musicians how their children might be able to carry on with their most favourite thing, playing live music. ■

Further information

For Further information about David Jackson's work, and the concert DVD *David Jackson: Celebration Concert Zusammen mit Menschen aus Bethel*, visit:

www.jaxontonewall.com

Full details of how to purchase the DVD are also available on the above website.

The Soundbeam Project:

www.soundbeam.co.uk

Meldreth Manor School:

www.scope.org.uk/education/meldreth.php